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UNCLAS GUATEMALA 000723

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SUBJECT: GUATEMALAN VIEWS ON IRAQ SITUATION

REF: GUATEMALA 708

1. (U) Summary. President Portillo told reporters on March 18 that Guatemala "stands beside the United States," but said Guatemala does not take a position for or against war with Iraq. He added that he sent a letter of support to President Bush (reftel). According to the MFA, the GOG delegation to the Roatan Centam Presidential Summit reportedly had instructions to sign a joint statement on Iraq, but it failed to achieve consensus. Some opposition party leaders have expressed strong support for the U.S. while others have expressed concern over economic fallout due to rising energy prices. Guatemalan public opinion is divided on Iraq. End Summary.

2. (U) Speaking in his home town of Zacapa, President Alfonso Portillo told reporters that Guatemala has not taken a position on hostilities with Iraq. However, he stressed that in this delicate time Guatemala "will stand with its ally, the United States." Portillo dodged questions about possible economic repercussions for Guatemala of any military action in Iraq. He said that although the international situation is "grave," Guatemala understands the responsibility of the U.S. to respond to it. Portillo described his recent letter to President Bush (reftel) as a further example of his support and told the crowd the letter was intended to "encourage U.S. authorities because they are living through difficult moments." Political cartoons lampooned Portillo's indecision on the potential hostilities, depicting him as a chicken buffeted by the winds of war but insisting that "we are not for or against, in fact just the opposite..."

3. (SBU) Deputy Foreign Minister Abiu told us on March 19 that Guatemala had instructed its representatives at the Centam presidential summit in Roatan, Honduras, to sign a Central American Summit statement on Iraq. He said that there had been no consensus on the statement, however, and said ultimately the statement was withdrawn. He said that President Portillo's statement was intended to make clear that, without taking a position for or against hostilities, the GOG will stand by the United States.

4. (U) Opposition party leaders have publicly and privately expressed a wide range of reactions to events in the Persian Gulf. Some have strongly endorsed U.S. military action, while others have limited themselves to expressing concern over the potential of economic consequences to Guatemala of any war.

5. (U) Public opinion appears divided. There have been a number of small, peaceful demonstrations outside the Embassy in recent weeks against the possibility of war in Iraq. The demonstrators tend to be student or religious groups and have not attracted large numbers of protesters. Despite fairly regular press coverage implying that Guatemala will suffer from higher energy prices and reduced tourism, most average Guatemalans are more concerned with daily problems than with events in the Middle East. The media has also devoted detailed coverage to the 860 active duty and 650 reservists of Guatemalan origin who are currently serving with the U.S. military, reporting in some cases anxiety about the possibility of war and in others, patriotic pride in serving their adopted country.

6 (SBU) Comment: We see Portillo's statement as trying to have it both ways.

HAMILTON